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FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8939
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 004360

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/14/2016
TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [PGOV](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: (C) MFA OFFICIAL ASSAILS EU LACK OF SOLIDARITY ON
SYRIA, ELYSEE FOR BEING TOO SOFT ON ISRAEL

REF: PARIS 4173 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant Herve Besancenot (protect throughout), during a June 22 farewell chat with poloff, criticized other EU members -- Spain and Austria in particular -- for going soft on Syria, and offered similar criticism of the Elysee for its more accommodating stance towards Israel, which he viewed as driven by internal politics. Besancenot offered his comments while reviewing the outcome of a regional conference of French ambassadors which took place in Amman earlier this week, and included French envoys from Egypt, Levant countries, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. Besancenot's comments point to a real shift in French policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and one which is clearly difficult for many MFA diplomats to swallow. End summary and comment.

¶2. (C) On Syria, Besancenot noted that French Ambassador to Syria Jean-Francois Girault had told conference participants that France was totally isolated among EU embassies in Damascus with its tough stance towards the Asad regime. Besancenot assailed the lack of solidarity among other EU embassies in Damascus, and noted with chagrin that the Austrian ambassador in Damascus, currently representing the EU presidency, had recently set up a lunch with Syrian Military Intelligence Chief Asif Shawkat without telling any other EU ambassadors. The lunch did not take place, but only due to a last minute cancellation on Shawkat's part. Besancenot described the Spanish ambassador in Damascus as leading a charge among EU embassies to upgrade contacts and dialogue with the SARG; according to Girault, the same Spanish ambassador had criticized the GoF for pursuing a personal vendetta against the Syrian government, driven by President Chirac.

¶3. (C) Highlighting the Amman conference discussion on Israel, Besancenot reported that French Ambassador to Israel Gerard Araud caused a minor outcry by making a short presentation highlighting Israel's overwhelming military advantage over its neighbors, and the need to recognize the historical truth that territorial disputes are decided by the victors. Besancenot, clearly aghast, noted with approval that Araud was rebutted by French Ambassador to Iraq Bertrand Bajolet and French Ambassador to Lebanon Bernard Emie, who assailed Araud's thesis as contrary to international law and decades of French foreign policy. Emie added that while the Palestinians would have to accept whatever partial withdrawals Israel offered, this did not mean that France should recognize unilateral Israeli declarations of its border in contravention of international law and multiple UN resolutions. Besancenot confided that he was preoccupied by rumors that Araud is a contender to replace MFA Political Director Stanislas de Laboulaye -- part of an expected

reshuffling of several high-level posts in coming months, including possibly Berlin, Washington, and New York. If Araud did take over the Political Director slot, Besancenot confided, this would be "disastrous" for his issues, as, in Besancenot's view, Araud lacked knowledge about the region and approached the region's issues from a perspective very different from that of most officials in the bureau.

4, (C) Besancenot heaped additional criticism on what he described as a softening GoF line towards Israel, driven by the Elysee. He reported that during the preparations for the recent visit of Israeli PM Olmert (reftel), the Elysee had deleted wholesale from Chirac's briefing package a number of MFA-drafted talking points bringing up contentious issues, such as Israeli withholding of PA tax revenues and Israel security actions in Gaza. On the latter point, Besancenot confirmed that the Presidency had watered down language in MFA-drafted press statements in response to Israeli actions in Gaza, removing references to "condemnation" and making the texts more balanced towards Israel. Besancenot summed up his personal view that the Elysee actions were "deplorable" and driven by French internal politics, specifically Chirac's desire to win support of France's Jewish community for his center-right UMP party in April 2007 presidential elections. Besancenot added that his views were shared by the majority of his MFA colleagues, with exceptions like Ambassador Araud in Tel Aviv.

15. (C) Comment: Besancenot is a classic MFA Arabist, and his deep dismay points to a real evolution in the GoF approach to Israeli-Palestinian issues. We found utterly unconvincing Besancenot's thesis that Chirac's shift was due to a desire to help his UMP party win the 2007 presidential elections; given that Chirac's longtime political nemesis, Nicolas

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Sarkozy, is nearly certain to win the party nomination, it remains an open question whether Chirac even wants his party to prevail in 2007. Instead we see the improving GoF stance towards Israel as due to a number of factors over the past few years: the death of Arafat and the end of a personal bond between Chirac and the Palestinian leadership, Gaza withdrawal and the late-in-life reconciliation between Chirac and Sharon; the increasingly Islamist character of Palestinian nationalism, especially after Hamas' election victory; and the perception that France and Israel have common cause against Islamic extremism, especially vis-a-vis Iran. It is clear that these changing realities are difficult for many MFA stalwarts to accept, but they point to a potential for greater cooperation between the U.S. and France in the NEA region, beyond Lebanon, for the long term. End comment.

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